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The Knots Of Death

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A number of Viking monuments feature a curious design known as the valknut, the "knot of the slain" or, more loosely, "the knot of death". On an 8th century CE picture stone from Hammers in Larbro, Gotland, it consists of three interlocking triangles. This stone, now in Stockholm's National Historical Museum, is divided into several panels; one of the central panels, in which the valknut occurs, depicts several motifs that suggest some sort of connection with the cult of Odin - an eagle, a flying figure - possibly a valkyrie - holding a ring, a man being hanged from a tree and a group of three warriors - with shields and upraised swords - led by a fourth man who seems to be holding a large bird of some kind. The valknut is adjacent to the eagle and below it are two men, one with a spear, who appear to be engaged in placing a corpse inside what looks like a burial mound. Between them and the hanged man is what appears to be another, smaller, valknut of the same design. This type can also be seen on a rather splendid golden ring discovered near Peterborough, Cambs, and currently on display at the British Museum in a cabinet labeled as containing Anglo-Saxon "secular" metalwork. Another picture stone from Gotland (Tangelgarda also in Larbro) has a panel showing a rider being welcomed by a woman holding a drinking horn with four men who are holding rings. The woman may be a valkyrie, a "chooser of the slain", one of whose functions was to serve ale to the Warriors in Valhalla, another pointer to the cult of Odin. The rider has a valknut behind his head and there are two more among his horse's legs. On this stone, which can also be seen at the Swedish Museum, the valknut is made up of a single line, interlaced to make three triangles.

Similar to the Tangelgarda design, but slightly more rounded, is that carved onto one of several "hogback" monuments at Brompton, Yorkshire, and probably dating from the 10th century CE. The end-beasts of this particular hogback - these monuments are based on Viking Age houses (although to this eye they have more than a passing resemblance to long barrows) and the end-beasts are situated at what would be the gable ends - are easily identifiable as bears, again suggesting the cult of Odin, who was patron of the Warriors known as berserkr or "bear-shirts". The purpose of the hogbacks is uncertain; no graves have been found with them so they were certainly not tombstones. Hogbacks with undecorated ends at Lythe in Yorkshire exactly match the shafts of crosses found at

the same site, indicating that the hogback formed a composite monument with a cross at each end. In this case the hogback is certainly a religious monument and it seems fair to suppose that the Brompton hogback and its fellows, and similarly ended hogbacks elsewhere, are also religious structures, albeit of a different faith.

The Brompton hogback has five valknuts in a row. The Brompton style valknut also occurs on each of the four arms of the Gosworth Cross (Cumbria), on both faces. The shaft of the cross strangely enough has scenes from heathen myth, and the only remotely Christian looking scene, which has been rather desperately identified as the Crucifixion, seems to owe more to the rune-winning ordeal of Odin described in the heathen poem "Havamal" than it does to the New Testament. The same type of valknut appears on the shafts of crosses at Sockburn (Co Durham), Lastingham, Hawsker and Brompton (all North Yorks). On the last, three of these valknuts are arranged in a triangular pattern.

A fourth type of valknut, rather different from those described so far, occurs on a stone cross from Andreas on the Isle of Man and is now in the Manx Museum, Douglas. This version is basically a simple knot "tied" in such a way as to retain the basic tripartite structure of the versions mentioned above. Unlike the others it is not a closed structure but its identity as a valknut, while mildly contentious, is not really in doubt. The scene in which it appears shows a man, evidently Odin, holding a spear pointing downward as he is devoured by a great wolf. An eagle perches on the man's shoulder and the valknut is at his side. The same design appears elsewhere, on a stone discovered in 1822 at Gosforth and now incorporated into the structure of the local church. It is between the back legs of a horse. On a picture stone from Alskog, in Gotland, it occurs twice among the eight legs of Odin's horse, Sleipnir. Despite this seeming wealth of examples and the diversity of styles the valknut itself has remained enigmatic. It seems to be associated with horses, particularly with the steed of Odin, and the cult of Odin in general. Motifs associated with the symbol include the hanged man, valkyries, bears, and the scene from Ragnarok on the Manx Cross, all indicating some connection with Odin. According to HR Ellis Davidson, the valknut also appears on the funeral ship excavated at Oseberg, Norway in 1904, and on the tapestry found in that vessel, indicating some sort of funerary association.

The origin and meaning of the symbol are extremely difficult to discern, as is its association with Odin. Obviously it has a decorative value as distinct from its symbolic meaning. The valknut has been used as a motif by Scandinavian weavers since the Viking Age. Indeed, it is recognized as a traditional design in that part of the world quite apart from its alleged occurrence on the Oseberg tapestry. Davidson opines that it is related to the Celtic triskele, the three-legged symbol most familiar as the emblem of the Isle of Man and linked with the Irish God of the sea, Manannan. The triskele is essentially a variety of the swastika, a common enough cosmological symbol, but neither can be said to possess the characteristic interweaving of the valknut. While it may be unwise to dismiss a possible relationship between triskele and valknut, it must be said that any resemblance is purely superficial, lying solely in their tripartite structures. Structurally the valknut has more in common with the Celtic triple spiral motif which is also found on Old English and Pictish artifacts and much older objects. Unfortunately there is a dearth of hard evidence for the mythological or religious significance of the triple spiral, which tends to occur within wholly abstract or symbolic designs, but it occurs within funerary contexts and has been linked with the female principle by various scholars. The various types of valknut, their contexts aside, share two important characteristics: they are tripartite and they are constructed by interweaving or inter-linking.

Davidson also postulates a link with the bindings that occur in Norse tradition. The best known examples of this are probably the binding of Loki following his betrayal of Baldr; the binding of Baldr himself, a theme that found itself into Scandinavian and Old English interpretations of the Crucifixion; the binding of the wolf Fenrir; the ritual binding of sacrificial victims, as partly confirmed by the discovery of bound corpses in the peat bogs of northern Europe; and the Herjoturr or "war fetter", a kind of paralysis that Odin and the valkyries were said to be able to inflict upon disfavored warriors in the heat of battle. To these we might add the hangman's noose characteristic of the double sacrifice - simultaneous hanging and stabbing - known to have been used in the cult of Odin and a method of ritual killing that accords with the condition of a number of bog corpses. One bog discovery, the severed head of a man discovered at Osterby in Denmark, is very interesting; the hair on the right side of the head is gathered into an elaborate knot that looks very much like a valknut.

Tacitus, writing at about the time the Osterby man is believed to have met his end, about the 1st century CE, tells us that the warriors of the Suebi (a generic name for the Germanic tribes inhabiting the region now occupied roughly by north western Germany, Denmark and the Netherlands) tied their hair in such a knot, and a number of Roman monuments depict Germanic warriors with the same hairstyle. It would be reasonable to suppose that this hair-knot marked a warrior as a follower of an early form of Odin in his role of war god. (See the author's article on "Heretical Hairdos" in Talking Stick magazine Spring 1992 for a further discussion of pagan hairstyles and the symbolic significance.)

The noose found around the neck of the Lindow Man unearthed from a peat bog in Cheshire a few years ago consists of a sliding knot in a cord knotted at each end, making a triple knot. A similar noose was found on a body in a peat bog at Borremose, Denmark but the noose found on another Danish corpse, from Tollund, is much simpler. Dr. Anne Ross and Dr. Don Robins, along with the Danish archaeologist Professor P V Glob, believe that these nooses are related to the Celtic torc, and note that a number of torcs seem to be designed to look like garrottes. They suggest that the corpses from Tollund and Borremose were sacrifices to Nerthus, a goddess mentioned by Tacitus, and that the torc was an attribute of that goddess. Tacitus also tells us that certain warriors of the Chatti wore iron collars that would not be removed until they had killed their first enemy, although many chose to wear them until they died. In their case the collar probably indicated they were dedicated to a god of war as opposed to a goddess of peace and plenty like Nerthus. It would be rash to state unequivocally that the collar and torc represent stylized versions of the noose or garrote - but it is an attractive proposition. However, torcs and collars are not valknuts, and only the nooses found on Lindow Man and his Danish counterpart can possibly be construed as being such.

It seems fairly certain that the valknut has a cultic or religious significance and a particular association with death, as it name alone indicates. The Andreas Cross shows the death of Odin, himself the Lord of the Dead Warriors of Valhalla, and on the Alskog stone the valknut appears by the feet of Sleipnir, the steed on which Odin, and also Heimdall, rode to the land of Hel. It is seen by the hanged man and in the funerary scene on the stone from Hammars and on the Tangalgarda stone the rider seems to be receiving a welcome to the realm of the dead. The scenes often include female figures who appear to be valkyries or maybe even the death goddess Hel herself. The presence of the valknut on Viking Age crosses in England and on the Brompton hogback hints at a retention of this element of heathen iconography among the adherents of the new cult.

The valknut is certainly part of the iconography associated with Odin but that fact alone brings us no nearer to its meaning. Representations of Odin and scenes from myths pertaining to him are common enough and their components are usually readily identifiable. If the valknut does stem from the cult or mythology of Odin, then it must represent something that cannot be given a pictorial rendering, either because of a taboo or simply because it just cannot be pictured in anything but an abstract form.

The form is tripartite and interwoven; the context is mortuary, Odinic and Otherworldly and it has both equine and feminine associations. This set of conditions is peculiar to the mythology of the World Tree and can be related to certain beings associated with it. The World Tree is Yggdrasill or "The Steed of the Fearful One", which makes it a doublet of Sleipnir. It has three roots which link the worlds together. According to Snorri Sturlson, each root leads to a well or spring; Hvergemir in Niflheim; Mimisbrunnr "in the direction of the frost ogres", and Urdabrunnr "in the sky", the Well at which the three Nornir gather to decide the fates of humans and gods alike.

Now it is clear from a number of references that these three wells are in fact only one under three different names. A consideration of their locations clinches the argument. Hvergelmir is the primordial well, situated in the north, according to Snorri's account of the creation of the cosmos. The nature of the "frost ogres" means that they can also be located in the cold north, and the central point of the revolving sky is also in the north, at the Pole Star. The Nornir derive their collective name from an archaic word meaning "north" which also denotes "that which is below" (compare English nether, beneath). The name of the goddess Nerthus (a goddess of the earth) reported by Tacitus may also be so derived.

While the Nornir each have individual names in England, they go by the name allocated to the eldest in Norse Tradition. The elder of the three is called Urdr by the Norse, which is cognate with the Old English "wyrd", hence the three "weird sisters" of Shakespeare. Thus they are a three-in-one being in the same way as the Irish war goddesses known as the Morrigna. Like the other, inevitably triadic, Indo European fates, the Nornir spin and weave destinies. One of them is also named as a valkyrie.

This brings us back to Odin, himself a shaper of destinies. In the "Gylfaginnning" section of Snorri's "Edda" he appears in a triadic guise and is credited with having taken a drink from the well at the center of the world, one source of his wisdom. Odin acquired the wisdom of the runes while hanging on the World Tree and could obtain information from the dead. The latter - apart from those worthy fighters chosen to carouse in Valhalla until Ragnarok (the Twilight of the Gods) and those who ended up in the paradisal Odainsakr, or abode of the righteous dead, the hall Gimle - resided with the dread goddess Hel in the underground realm variously known as Niflhel, Niflheim or simply as Hel located in the far north. This goddess of the dead was said to be Loki's offspring, conceived and born while he was in the form of a mare following a dangerously mischievous escapade.

Actually she can be traced back to proto-Indo-European times and her original name has been reconstructed as Kolyo, "the coverer". As Bruce Lincoln puts it in his book, "Death, War and Sacrifice" (1991), "Her domain is underground and she physically conveys her victims thence by fixing a snare or noose on their bodies and dragging them down. Her bonds regularly fall upon the foot or neck of the victim, the same places where domestic animals are fettered. The deceased are thus led away like animals by Death, in whose bonds they may struggle, but which they cannot escape, caught in her snares and dragged under."

Lincoln presents an impressive body of evidence to support this summary, from Ancient Greece, Rome, Scandinavia, India and Iran. The theme has altered from place to place and from one age to another but the essence has remained. He also notes that the Middle High German term for a noose was "helsing", which he translates as "Hel's Sling". He argues that German sacrifice by hanging, generally related to Odin or Woden, was actually a ritual enactment of the seizing of the victim by the goddess of death. Given the mutual concerns of Odin, Hel and the Nornir, it seems to make little difference either way.

In Old English texts the term "wyrd" is, despite its other connotations, frequently used to denote death rather than a structured and unfolding future that is suggested by the functions of the Nornir and their Greek and Roman counterparts. There is of course an intimate relationship between the two concepts and death is after all the fate of every being. Scandinavian myth makes it clear that there are only two things which the gods cannot avert; fate and death. In Norse myth the name of the senior Norn is Urdr, a word in Old Icelandic that can also denote a burial mound or cairn. "Beowulf" and other texts characterize wyrd as a weaving of webs but the word usually means nothing less than the moment of death, or at least the events leading up to death.

The "Beowulf" motif is revealing, however; it has already been noted that the fates tend to be spinners or weavers and in this instance there is also the idea of a snare, which can refer back to the Indo-European goddess of death as described by Lincoln. Like Hel, the Nornir reside in the far north, at or near the celestial axis and like her they reside "below ground", where the World Tree has its roots. The Nornir determine life, span and the time of death, while Hel takes the dead to her cold bosom. All these characteristics are shared to some extent with Odin, as is their femininity, apparently adopted by Odin in order to engage in seidr - the natural magic of womankind.

At the very least, Hel and the Nornir are closely related, perhaps even deriving from the same proto Indo-European goddess, and Odin has acquired some of their characteristics by virtue of his association with the cosmic center, the structure of which reflects their own nature. If the valknut symbolizes anything then, it is probably either wyrd, death, or perhaps even the Nornir themselves, who are more or less the same as wyrd anyway. Exactly when the valknut would have come to represent these is difficult to estimate. Certainly the examples here all date from the Viking Age and appear to range in time from about the 7th to the 10th centuries CE. I am not aware of any valknuts of a significantly earlier date. It is interesting that in England the use of the valknut seems to have died out with the establishment of Christianity and the consequent decline of heathenism. The Nornir are not represented pictorially

anywhere in the Germanic world, which is rather surprising. A panel of the Franks Casket shows three hooded figures who might be intended as a likeness of that fateful trinity, but it is by no means certain. Until any conclusive artifacts come to light the truth of the matter must remain as uncertain as the workings of the Fates themselves.

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